

# Laugh with Children



**Look for playful ways to interact with children—sing silly songs, read funny books and rhymes, and redirect challenging behavior with humor.**

Imagine yourself in your classroom and tune in to the sounds of children. Hear their laughter, giggles, and chuckles. Feel their sense of hilarity, joy, and glee. Think about the children in your program. What makes them laugh? When it comes to laughter, playfulness, and silliness, children are the ultimate professionals! Young children find things to laugh about at every turn.

## Humor and Powerful Interactions

Laughter, silliness, and playfulness can help to make your interactions with children powerful. When you take a moment to be present and then connect, you're likely to see an opportunity to use humor or playfulness to extend learning in a Powerful Interaction.

Humor extends learning in many ways. First, humor is play for the brain. It makes the brain work in new ways (Neeley et al. 2012). Humor often involves playing with language, such as tongue twisters, silly rhymes, and puns. Through humor, children can develop phonological awareness and add words to their vocabularies. As children learn to use humor to interact with others, they are learning a lifelong social skill.

Humor arises from children's desire and need to connect. It is one way children share their accomplishments and, at times, their surprise when things turn out differently than expected (Smidl 2014). See the figure on page 122 for an overview of how humor develops across childhood.





## Tips for Introducing Humor in Interactions

After a good laugh together, the stress of the day can diminish, a cheery mood can replace a sour one, and a new burst of energy can appear. Not surprisingly, humor and laughter are often a part of Powerful Interactions.

Begin by seeking out playful moments with each child. Follow a child's lead or be the leader. When a child laughs, find out what is tickling her funny bone and join the fun. Once you know what makes each child laugh, you'll be able to have humorous interactions that will surely get a giggle. Here are some suggestions:

**When in doubt, sing.** Silly songs are sure winners in the laugh category, and they are a great way to play with words and language. Children often find it funny when you make up songs using their names and their activities in the classroom. Brain researchers have discovered that exposure to music and singing is necessary for the healthy development of language and communication skills (Michener & Fishoff 2012).

Ms. Shani glances around her classroom of toddlers, most of whom are busy and happy. She notices Koren standing by himself, looking a bit forlorn. She connects by catching his eye. Then remembering his glee as they sang "Boom, Boom, Ain't It Great to Be Crazy" on yesterday's walk, she begins to sing the song as she approaches him. A smile appears on his face, she sits on the floor next to him, and they take turns singing lines of the song together for a few minutes and share a good laugh!

			
<p><b>Babies</b> laugh when their special people do out-of-the-ordinary things like . . .</p>	<p><b>Toddlers</b> laugh at mix-ups like . . .</p>	<p><b>Preschoolers</b> laugh at nonsense, intentional mistakes, and exaggerations like . . .</p>	<p><b>Kindergartners and primary grade children</b> laugh at verbal humor like . . .</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Goofy dances</li> <li>› Sticking out their tongues</li> <li>› Foolish noises</li> <li>› Silly mouth sounds</li> <li>› Funny faces</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Shoes on heads</li> <li>› Bananas as telephones</li> <li>› Little coat on big person</li> <li>› Pointing to an eye when the grown-up says <i>nose</i></li> <li>› Calling people by wrong names</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› "You're a silly-billy!"</li> <li>› "Can I have a pandwich?"</li> <li>› "I want some mud juice!"</li> <li>› "You have a square head!"</li> <li>› Picture of a giant mouse</li> <li>› Loud pretend crying</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Knock-knock jokes</li> <li>› Word plays</li> <li>› Riddles</li> </ul>

Adapted from Kutner (2018) and McGhee (1979).



## Reality Check

Every so often, do a Me Check and tune in to the mood that you are expressing to children. Have you smiled today? Or laughed? Have children seen your playful side?

**Bring toys to life.** Fostering children’s oral language development and conversation skills are among the most important responsibilities you have as a teacher. Some children may be more comfortable talking to a favorite toy than to you. Try giving a silly voice to a doll, a puppet, a stuffed animal, a truck, a ball, even a puzzle piece! Use them have to a conversation with the child.

Watching 3-year-old Salia play silently with her favorite baby doll in the dramatic play area of his classroom, Thomas decides to connect by sitting in a low chair beside her. He picks up a different doll, then extends her learning. Using a high-pitched baby voice, he makes his baby doll talk to her baby doll. As the two babies take turns “talking to each other,” Thomas and Salia dissolve into giggles!

**Play copycat.** Imitation games make children laugh, and they are a good way to extend children’s skills. You can focus a copycat game on whatever skill a particular child needs to work on—certain sounds or words, a physical skill, counting, or drawing can be made into a copycat game. And don’t forget to take turns being the leader!

Ms. Doris scans her classroom of 4-year-olds and notices Marco making a pattern block design with the yellow hexagons and the red trapezoids. Ms. Doris connects by sharing her observation of how much Marco enjoys playing with the pattern blocks. She decides to extend his learning by initiating a copycat game as a way to introduce other blocks into his design, saying, “Hey, Marco, will you play copycat with me?” Marco smiles and replies, “Sure, Ms. Doris!” Ms. Doris says, “You can be the leader first and then I’ll take a turn.” Each time Marco adds a block, Ms. Doris pretends to think really hard and tells Marco he made it too hard. He laughs out loud. When they swap roles, Ms. Doris introduces different pattern blocks and Marco adds them to his design without hesitation.

**Laugh it up with language.** Young children are learning language at an amazing rate. They are captivated by new words and new ways of putting them together. When you make up new words, rattle off nonsense rhymes, do funny finger plays, recite playful poems, and read humorous children’s books, you make the world of words an exciting and fun place to play. Listen to Theresa’s conversation with 5-year-old Jade at the snack table.

**Theresa:** Jade, I see you have a banana for snack today. Let's give it a new name. Let's call it a fanana. How do you like your fanana?

**Jade:** (*Grins.*) I love my fanana!

**Theresa:** (*Winks.*) Okay, you're eating a fanana. What's Davey having for snack?

**Jade:** (*Laughs.*) He's having a bapple!

**Make merry with movement.** When you encourage children to use their bodies in new and interesting ways, you support their fine and gross motor development. And because brains and bodies are closely linked, you are giving them a mental workout as well. Fiddling fingers, twiddling toes, shaking shoulders, leaping legs, active arms, and bouncing bodies create joy and learning for dancers of all ages!

As Ms. Bea plays energetic music, 8-month-old Samuel crawls toward her. "Are you coming to ask me for a dance, Mr. Samuel? I'd love to have this dance with you!" She kneels down, lifts him up on his feet, holds onto his hands, and helps him dance by moving his body in many different ways. By the time the music ends, both Ms. Bea and Samuel are gasping for breath in between their laughing!



## Reality Check

Perhaps you don't think of yourself as a "funny" person. Don't worry! Begin by taking children's lead. Pay attention to what makes them laugh and start there. We think you'll find that young children are an easy audience for your budding sense of humor.



## Reality Check

When using laughter and humor as part of a Powerful Interaction, it is mandatory that both people are enjoying the moment. For example, sarcasm is never appropriate with young children. They interpret your words literally and do not understand that you are kidding around. As the adult, be sensitive to the child's culture and experiences. Your sense of humor might be going over the child's head. The child might not be in a playful mood or might not feel comfortable enough with you to relax and laugh. Or you may learn that smiling and laughing are interpreted differently in a child's culture and a child may not demonstrate these behaviors in your setting. Your observation skills are your best tool for figuring out if, when, where, how, and with whom to laugh, be playful, and have fun.

## How's It Going?

Humor is a wonderful way to extend children's learning. Look for clues that tell you that your funny and enjoyable Powerful Interactions are having an impact.

Children may be more joyful and happy:

- › Babies will pay attention to people who are laughing and having fun.
- › Toddlers may begin using silly rhymes and words or bring their favorite funny books to you at story time.
- › When you suggest playing a copycat game with pattern blocks or color cubes, preschoolers may get excited because they know they are about to have fun while they learn the names of shapes, colors, and positional words.

You may

- › Observe singing, laughing, and dancing happening
- › Find you're playing or singing silly songs more often; some children have favorite silly songs and beg to hear them regularly
- › Be laughing more; perhaps you're using humor to redirect children's challenging behavior, break the ice with a very shy child, release the tension of a stressful day, or give yourself an energy boost



## Remember

Add laughter and humor to your pedagogical toolkit and decide when and with whom to use it to extend children's learning during Powerful Interactions.